

Exploring conservation strategies of protected areas through ecotourism

By Niranjan NB

Indian cities are amidst phenomenal transformation in terms of development and economy. Growth and urbanization require the consumption of resources like land, water and minerals, consequently altering the balance between people and nature. The growing cities fulfil their land and resource requirement by expanding into periphery areas, and posing a threat to protected areas in the urban landscape. The session on **'Building Synergies in Ecotourism and Natural Heritage'** during the Urban Symposium on 'Harmonizing Heritage and Innovation in Cities' hosted by UN-Habitat in partnership with GIZ on 19th - 20th December 2019 in Jaipur, focusses on re-establishing the delicate nature-human balance and harmonizing the ecosystem with dynamic transformative cities by adapting strategies which can promote conservation, tourism and livelihood.

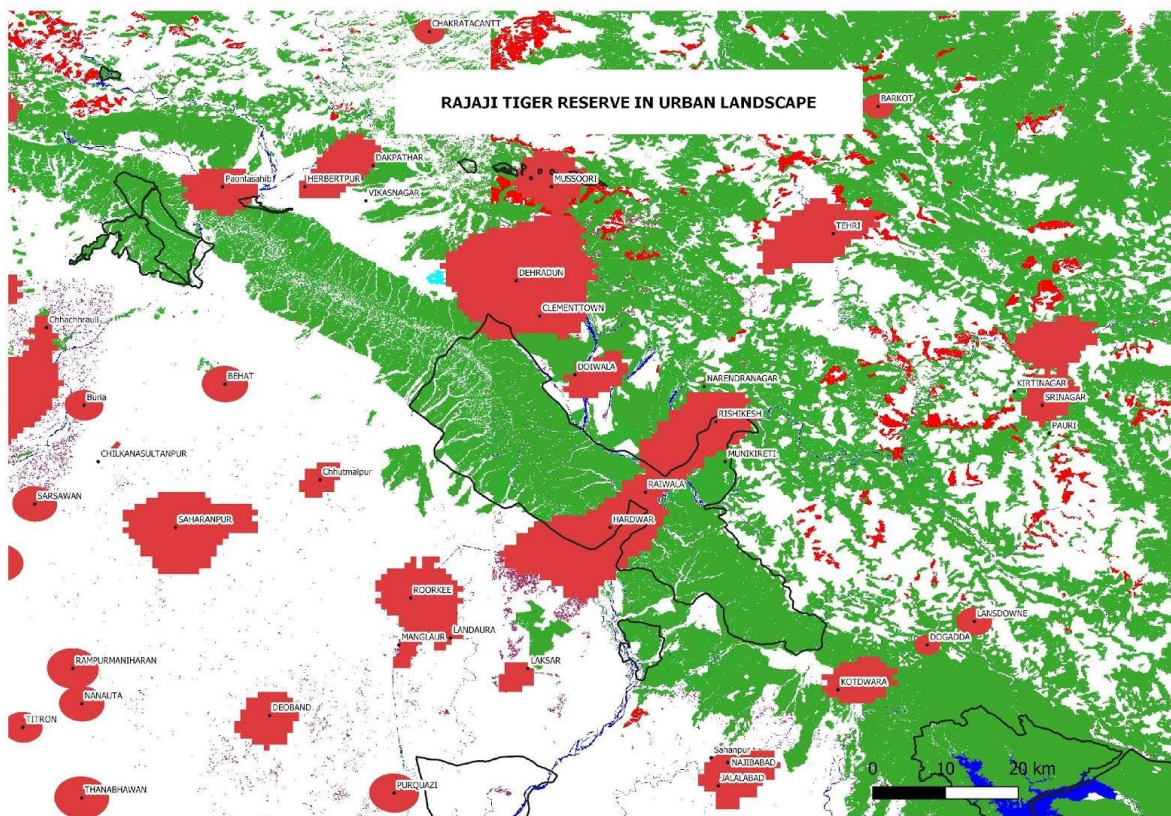


Figure 1 - The continuum of protected areas (shown in green) and the urban extent (shown in red). Source: Mr. Mohnish Kapoor, Head - Programme and Partnerships, Global Tiger Forum- presentation "Protected Areas and Urban Landscapes"

The session was aimed at realizing the importance of natural heritage and reinventing the spaces as centers of opportunity. Cases of Indian zoos, Jhalana forest, Jaipur, Rajaji Tiger Reserve, Uttarakhand, and Man Sagar Lake was presented during the session. These case studies highlighted the efforts of conserving the protected areas and simultaneously using the space to develop eco-tourism trails, birding fairs, safari and other activities that help in re-establishing the delicate nature -human linkages. The speakers during the session also emphasized on planning and management strategies for the conservation of protected areas.

Protecting the natural heritage by establishing strong ties with Government and Community. The protection and conservation of the natural heritage is possible by establishing a strong policy framework and the willingness of the local communities. Mr. Dhiraj Kapoor from Project Leopard, highlighted the efforts of the local wildlife enthusiasts along with the Rajasthan Forest Department, who were successful in protecting the Jhalana forest area in Jaipur and develop it into a renowned leopard reserve.

Similarly, Mr. Harsh Vardhan from the Indian Birding Fair Group spoke about the efforts of the local community to escalate the neglected condition of Man Sagar Lake in Jaipur to the government, initiating the restoration of the lake. After prolonged protests to restore the lake, the government identified a private investor to develop the landscape of the Jal Mahal (A heritage building in the center of the lake). The private investor initiated the restoration of the lake as a part of the landscape improvement project. Due to the improvements, the site was inhabited by migratory birds in winters and the Indian Birding Fair Group, a non-profit organization, protects the restored lake by organizing Birding Fair every year. Both the cases of Jhalana forest and Man Sagar Lake highlight the importance of Government-Community ties in conserving the protected areas.



Figure 2 - People protesting against the negligence of Man Sagar Lake.

Source: Mr. Harsh Vardhan, Ecologist and Honorary Secretary, Indian Birding Fair Group - presentation "Man Sagar Lake Case Study"

Ecological benefits of protecting Natural Heritage. It is a well-established fact that natural ecosystems benefit humans through their natural cycles and resources. Mr. Mohnish Kapoor, from the Global Tiger Forum, during his presentation on Rajaji Tiger Reserve which is a part of Jim Corbett Reserve, highlighted a recent study by Indian Institute of Forest Management stating that Jim Corbett Reserve contribute services worth Rs 14.7 billion per year through its natural process like carbon sequestering, capturing watershed, natural purification of water, protection of topsoil and other delicate cycles of nature. The need to conserve ecosystems and natural cycles amidst unprecedented resource consumption by urban areas is more important than ever as once the balance with the ecosystem is lost; people will have to pay multi-folds for the same services provided free by nature.

Protected areas as an opportunity for livelihood. Protected areas and ecosystems in urban setup face a constant threat from development. The conservation and protection of the endangered areas is a continuous participatory process. Creating livelihoods for the local communities increase the participation in conservation. The protected areas need effective planning which can balance the natural cycles and, simultaneously, provide a livelihood. The cases discussed during the session highlight the effective planning strategies and adaptive uses that can provide employment opportunities. Mr. Dhiraj Kapoor highlighted the improvement in ecotourism by offering Leopard spotting safari in Jhalana forest. The local communities nearby Jhalana forest are involved in ecotourism activities and are employed as security staff, jeep drivers, retailers and support staff in the leopard reserve. Local communities are provided training to effectively handle human-animal conflict by local NGOs and institutes. Similarly, Mr. Mohnish Kapoor highlighted that the locals are dependant on the forest produce and earn a livelihood by selling the produce.



Figure 3 - Collage showing the development in Jhalana Leopard Reserve which provides a livelihood for local communities. Source: Mr Dhiraj Kapoor, Conservation Activist, Jhalana Forest - presentation "Jhalana Leopard Reserve Case Study"

Overall, the session on Building Synergies in Ecotourism and Natural Heritage has provided insights on the need for conservation of protected areas, planning strategies to establish nature-human connect and sustainable livelihood opportunities.